

Opening speech

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“Healing and Reconciliation through Nonviolent Communication”

International NVC training Dhulikhel/Nepal, 17-24 December 2014

Dear Mr Chair, Mr Secretary, Pro Public colleagues, trainers, Nepalese and international participants... Sabaijana, namaskar!

On behalf of the Civil Peace Service Program of GIZ (ZFD/GIZ), I too, would like to warmly welcome you all to the opening of our international training in Nonviolent Communication (NVC).

The ZFD/GIZ program in Nepal has been supporting peacebuilding, reconciliation, and human rights since the decade-long armed conflict between the Maoists and the Government of Nepal came to an end. We work together with local organizations like Pro Public, Network of Families of the Disappeared and Missing (NEFAD), and the Community Mediators' Society (CMS), represented here today. It is an honor and pleasure to make this particular training available. I will explain later why.

About half a year ago, some of my colleagues in Pro Public, ZFD/GIZ, and I had a series of conversations that essentially came down to two questions. According to the founder of NVC, Marshall Rosenberg, these are the two most important questions in life to know the answer to, if you want to bring peace in the midst of conflict. The first question is: "What is going on with us?" The second is: "What could make our lives more wonderful?"

At the time of our conversations, the bill for the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission on Enforced Disappearances was being drafted. There were intense debates between the government, victims' organizations, human rights organizations, media, and donors on issues such as amnesty for perpetrators, remedy for victims, truth-finding, and ways to bring about justice and reconciliation.

“What was going on with us?” My colleagues and I realized we felt worried. We wanted the truth and reconciliation process to be not just a procedure to formally close a painful chapter in Nepal's history. We wanted it to contribute to deep, heart-felt, healing for everyone hurt by the armed conflict including victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.

We felt worried because lessons from, for example, Latin America had taught us that the workings of a TRC do not automatically lead to reconciliation. When old wounds are reopened in the absence of a supportive framework, such a commission runs the risk of aggravating the very suffering, anger, and polarisation it is supposed to address. One of the slogans of South Africa's TRC was “revealing is healing,” yet people's anger and grief were compounded by the terrible truths that surfaced. Whether it actually achieved its goal of healing remains unclear. In Nepal, this key aspect of reconciliation has received little attention so far. Reconciliation, truth, and justice have primarily been framed as legal or human rights issues in the public discourse here, not as issues (also) belonging to peacebuilding, a field that has healing at its center.

How can the people in Nepal heal what has been broken or hurt? The estimate numbers of people who died, were harmed or disappeared during the armed conflict are regularly cited in the newspapers. Less often we hear about the pain of the thousands of perpetrators, the bystanders, and the millions of people who had to live in a country at war with itself. Either directly or indirectly, violence touches the lives of many more people than just the victims and perpetrators. It touches future lives, the lives of unborn children and grandchildren.

In fact, wherever we turn, we can see chains of violence, exclusion, and abuse. Not only do we see political violence, we see violence between and within communities, between bosses and workers, in-laws, parents and children, and between husband and wife. And if oppression is being deprived of choice, we have all experienced it, starting in our childhood (as NVC trainer Miki Kashtan put it). This is what we inherit from the world. Perhaps most harmful of all is the violence we inflict upon ourselves, when we blame ourselves for a mistake, judge ourselves negatively, and decide that we will never be a good enough wife, husband, parent, professional, human being.

In a way, we are all suffering at various degrees, struggling to find ways to reconcile us with ourselves and with one another. When our actions have caused harm to others, we have a hard

time frankly accepting that. Often we are not able to enjoy the kind of peace that can result from having a constructive and honest conversation. How to address this, I think, is the issue before us: Learning how to actually communicate with each other in a way that allows us to touch the issues that underlie the pain in our lives, because we tend to need each other for healing.

My colleagues and I asked ourselves the second question: "What could make our lives more wonderful?" We wanted to contribute to healing in Nepal. How could we support the people here to heal what has been broken or hurt? My own experiences with Nonviolent Communication (NVC) have helped me heal from past pain. They allow me to have conversations that, instead of blaming and fighting, lead to empathy and mutual understanding. From the participants of my practice groups, as well as from people trained by one of my former colleagues, I understood there is a great hunger for such knowledge and skills here in Nepal. This is how the idea of training persons directly involved in the truth and reconciliation process (such as victims' representatives and government officials), as well as professional peace service providers (such as mediators and dialogue facilitators) in NVC, was born.

NVC, as developed by Marshall Rosenberg, is both a view and a tool that helps us to stay connected with ourselves and others, especially in difficult circumstances. Individuals who have been trained in it can use conflicts, like political disagreement, as an opportunity to bridge the gap between opponents rather than enlarging it. They can use their skills to heal themselves and others. Testimonies of citizens from war-torn countries around the world, including Palestine, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, confirm this. People living in those countries say that they regained their spirits, confidence, and hope from the NVC training they received.

We do not need to pass on to our children and grandchildren the violence that has been passed on to us. NVC can help us create chains of healing, reconciliation, and peace, by teaching us how to relate to each other in constructive ways, even in difficult circumstances. Not just as an international to Nepalese; a donor to beneficiaries; a woman to a man; a secretary of the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction (MoPR) to an ex-People's Liberation Army combatant (ex-PLA); a dalit to a brahmin; a victim to a perpetrator, but as one human being to another human being, beyond stereotypes, images, labels, and roles.

Can it be done here, in Nepal? This is where you, dear Nepalese participants, come in. I would like to thank you for being here. I know you have had to leave busy lives and responsibilities as victims' representatives, mediators, community and ex-PLA dialogue facilitators, activists, teachers, government officials, and members of Local Peace Committees behind. I greatly appreciate your willingness to embark upon what may become a journey of deep personal change. This is why it is an honor for me to make this particular training available. It is also a pleasure, because I know NVC will make life more wonderful for many, if not all of you, just as it did for me.

I would like to thank Mr Secretary Punjali for coming to our opening night, and for supporting this training by recommending MoPR officials as participants. This gives me hope because I believe that when government officers start to apply NVC, chances increase that their policy decisions will be more beneficial for all those affected by them. I would like to thank Pro Public for organizing this training and for being an inspiring and dedicated partner on the path to establishing NVC here in Nepal. I would like to thank the trainers for coming all the way from the US, UK, Denmark and Sri Lanka, even as flights were delayed, and for your commitment to deliver a high-quality training. Finally, I would like to thank the international participants for being with us in wintery Nepal during Christmas time, a time which you might have been spending with family. No doubt your presence and perspectives will enrich the contents of this training. I am looking forward to get to know each of you better throughout this week.

"What is going on?" and "What would make life more wonderful?" How can we know what is needed for healing, if we do not ask ourselves and each other these questions? May this week help us find our own answers and rouse our curiosity for the answers of others. May we ask one another: "What is going on with you?" and "What would make your life more wonderful?" And start conversations that bring healing, right here and now.

Thank you.